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THREE STORIES

By

Ella V. Downey

B.A., University of Montana, 1966 and 1969

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

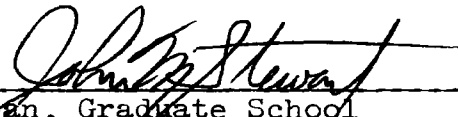
UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1974

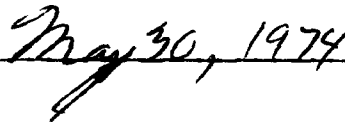
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CASUALTIES

CASUALTIES

The bell rang suddenly, impatiently, shattering the heavy mood that hovered over the kitchen. She was lost in her thoughts and its harshness, its impudence, startled her. It was a rude intrusion. Slowly she got to her feet, up from the wet floor, wiped her pale puckered hands on her dress along her thighs, sniffed the tears back, sighed forlornly, and stepped toward the stove. It was a relief to have the last batch of beans done. She switched off the current just as a deep body-shaking sob escaped. Slowly she eased down onto her knees and resumed her scrubbing and her thoughts.

She was worn out and her mind was muddled. In the thickness of its cloud a question kept pushing to the fore what was wrong? What had happened? When? She rubbed the linoleum in a half hearted way as she puzzled. Whose fault was it? Hers? His? Was this all there was to living? If this was it, why put forth so much effort? She was convinced that she was doing her best, she tried hard. No one kept house better than she did, it was clean and in order. She cooked, she washed, ironed and mended, and she did it all well, everyone said so. She was a good cook and God knew that took a lot of doing with rationing and shortages. Always it was make do with this, substitute for that, do without that. She did not expect a lot, but this way of living was empty, it was nothing. Not one thing, not one single thing went right, she reasoned with herself. Crazy hours! Up at strange times. To bed at weird times. Swing shifts. Graveyard shifts. She was just plain tired of being patriotic. Hot tears over-

flowed, trickled down her face, tasted salty on her lips, dribbled onto the front of her dress. If only he knew how miserable she was if only he knew. She checked the trend of her thoughts with a jerk, like reining in a fast running horse, maybe he did not even care. It shocked her for a second, she wanted him to know how miserable she was and to care. She was sure no one knew how miserable she was nor understood. She leaned back on her heels and gave way to her wounded feelings completely. Deep sobs convulsed her body, shaking her violently, mixing in with the heat, steam and muffled tones of the radio. Gradually, little by little, they slackened. She wiped away the tears on her sleeve, sniffed several times, pinched her nose with her soapy fingers and cleared her throat.

"Damn, double damn" she grumbled to herself as she searched in her pocket for a wad of a handkerchief. She drew the damp little ball out, blew her nose and dabbed at her burning eyes. No one on earth was as unhappy as she was, she just knew it. Her chest ached as if it had been pounded from the inside and her knees felt raw.

She moved on her aching knees to a new place near the refrigerator and with some vigor attacked the long black marks on the floor. "Damn," she snorted out loud. Supposed-to-be rubber heels she complained under her breath. Real honest-to-goodness rubber heels would not leave marks like that. Consumed with the effort to scour the marks away she forgot her self pity. Nothing is real anymore, everything is a substitute, a make-do. She rubbed and scoured and fretted, all of her pity and anger collected in her efforts to make the floor clean. Those kids if only they would pick up their feet. Her moods shifted quickly and she felt sorry for them and her

thoughts raced to rescue them. If it were not for the war they would not have to wear such junk. Poor kids! They were being cheated too, cheated out of the things they should have, but then, she backtracked, they were alive and had food, true, not just what they would like, but they were not hungry. She finished her scouring with a surge of angry vigor and sat back on her heels to admire the clean blue floor with its tan, orange and black designs. It was so pretty when it was clean, she told herself. The still wet surface glistened like a polished blue turquoise.

It had been fun selecting it from the many samples. Let's see it must be two years, she mused no, it could not be that long. Time had become vague, a nebulous passing of news of battles, successes and failures over there and battles, successes and failures right at home. She had lost track of its progress which she now measured in new ration stamps and diminishing supplies. It must be all of two years at least she argued with herself. That was before she had stuck a map of Europe on the wall beside the sink so she could keep track of the movements of the forces while she worked, while she worked with one ear constantly tuned into the announcements on the radio. That was an eternity ago, that was before she felt worn out and lost. That was before her world began to fall apart. Not just her world, the whole world had started to fall apart. She felt that she herself was breaking up into little bits, their family was breaking up oh! dear God!

She was through with crying, it was all out of her and a feeling of rebellion surged through her hot aching body. She turned to check her

scrubbing job and as if for revenge scoured where it did not need it, swiped at the wet surface with grim determination, more than she had felt for a long time. She rose up and emptied the bucket of soapy water into the sink, glimpsed sideways at the map and drew in a deep jerking breath.

The small radio crackled "This. is London." She turned abruptly and switched it off with so much force that the small ivory colored receiver slid across the enameled surface and she caught it just in time to keep it from falling to the floor.

"You, Ed Morrow, you and your damned war," she flared at the radio just as if he had been there. She was sick of war, war efforts, war plants, war everything and anything. It had completely upset her life. Her eyes narrowed a bit as she struggled with a thought that had lurked constantly in her mind lately. She kept trying to avoid it, kept stepping aside when it came too near the surface. It was like sword dancing, stepping ever so near the sharp blades, but always missing the cutting edges. Then with suddenness that stunned her it burst, like a fertile seed that has lain in good soil, watered by spring rains and lulled by warm sun, its thin coating split and she faced up to the idea that had been half dormant for many weeks. Was he really working overtime? There it was, she faced it squarely and with fear. Why was he so determined that she not go to work? Why did he insist that she remain home? She knew that the work could not be any harder than what she was doing. One by one her friends had gone to work in the war plants. It was one's patriotic duty they had all argued, but he had insisted that her duty was at home, he did not want her a part of "that

rat race," the boys needed her at home. Yes, he would work, but not her. Her not work, she sneered at the idea. His duty was in the war effort, hers was at home . . . that was what he had said. She frowned and caught her lower lip tightly between her teeth.

Slowly she lifted the lid of the large canning kettle, tipping the edge low towards her to force the steam up from the other side. It billowed up, enveloped her and filled the room with a heavy cloud of vapor and the odor of green beans. Involuntarily a deep sigh escaped and she tried to swallow the lump in her throat, but it refused to budge.

They surely did look nice, down in the water that still boiled around them. Fresh and green, right out of the garden that morning. Grown right there in their own backyard, right where the lush lawn with its tulip bed and roses had been before the war. War! Everything that was pretty and pleasant had been before the war, she thought. Everything had been plowed under like the lawn, the tulips and the roses, only useful things survived. Nothing was just for pleasure or beauty anymore. The sparkling linoleum was pretty and the beans were pretty in their own way, but that was not what she meant. Could he be in a bar?

A sudden thud against the window screen above the stove attracted her attention. It must have been a beetle of some sort that had hit the tiny wires with a dull vibrating thump and had dropped away. Dozens of small moths fluttered and clawed at the wire mesh. Their colorless furry bodies struggled and battled soundlessly to get in to the light. She stood quietly in the damp heat, her face glistening with perspiration, her dress sticking to her back and arms. Slowly she pushed her hair

back from her forehead, sighed and forced her shoulders back. She put the lid in the sink, leaned forward and rubbed her knees.

She waited quietly while the steam cleared away, watching the moths. The wire frame was heavy with the weight of the cans of beans. She lifted it from the boiling water and hooked it over the sides of the kettle above the still boiling water. She listened to the hissing and gurgling as the juices forced their way from beneath the lids. Her not work! One by one she lifted the hot jars, tightened the lids and inverted them on the breadboard to seal and cool. He could not be at a bar, he just never had done anything like that.

She waxed the clean floor and while it dried sagged down on to a chair, propped her feet up on another and stared dully at the fidgeting moths.

Why on earth did they wear themselves out for nothing? She frowned as she thought. Why did not they go away to some nice cool place and just rest? That was what she would do if she were a moth. A bar? Who would he go to a bar with? You did not go to bars alone. Just to be cool and rested.

She wiped her face on her sleeve with a quick upward movement of her arm, staggered to her feet and groaned. She shoved the table back into place, scooted the chairs into position, one to each side. No, he would not go to a bar. She emptied the hot water from the kettle and stood counting the hot jars, all standing up-side-down. Twenty one quarts! There was a feeling of satisfaction. Twenty one to add to those already stored in the basement. Little bubbles raced amongst the green pods, worked their way sprightly from the tops to the bot-

toms of the jars and vanished. And those telephone calls! Who was it who kept calling? Where was he now? Right that minute? Working? She wondered.

When the first call for John had come, she had thought the girl was asking for young John, but it was not young John that she wanted. That same voice had called four times now and not for young John. Twenty one quarts. Stupid I must be stupid, she mused. Twenty one just plain dumb. All those years she had done everything she could to make life pleasant and comfortable for her family stupid stupid moths. What hadn't she done? Twenty one dumb moths. No, that wasn't right someplace she had failed. When had whatever it was that wasn't right happened? Stupid moths! What hadn't she done? Twenty one dumb moths! No, that wasn't right. In a bar? She was always there waiting whenever he came home, time didn't matter. She was always there always there. What if just once she was not there? Would he be surprised? Maybe he took her for granted. Maybe he was too sure of her, that's what the magazine said. God, but I drag.

She poured herself a glass of cold water from the refrigerator and sat looking at it dully. Little tears of moisture collected on the sides of the glass and she drew designs with the tip of her finger. The sweat trickled down, made a damp ring on the tablecloth. Sounds from the radio next door drifted on the night air, sifted through the restless moths into the heavy stillness around her. A man's nasal voice bellowed out "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition." War again, there was no escaping it and now they were dragging God into it.

Could that have been June?

When he had first started working at the plant, he had discussed the girls that he worked with a lot. There was one, June, who he always called "that crazy mixed up kid." Who isn't crazy mixed up, she wondered?

June had started bringing all of her troubles to him. He had always been a good listener. He talked about June a great deal, confided in her the problems the girl discussed with him, they had seemed very child-like and unimportant. June had taken him for a ride in her car when she had gotten it. It was not a new one, they could not be had, but since she was doing defense work and could give rides to other defense workers, it had been possible for her to get it and she was very proud.

Crazy mixed up kid? Not so ~~crazy~~ and not so much of a kid either she told herself. Crazy like a fox.

She tried to recall when he had quit talking about June. Her mind eased back to when he had left his old job to start at the war plant. He had gone in with so much patriotism; he was pleased that he was doing his part in the effort. He had been honestly sincere and conscientious and she shared his enthusiasm and dedication. He was an honest and sincere man, was completely overwhelmed by the waste of time and material, the inefficiency, the backbiting and money-grabbing that he found there.

He worried and confided in her his concern, but somewhere he had changed, he was not the man now that she used to listen to with admiration; he was not the same man, the one she used to know so well. She did not like him as he was now. Why had he changed so?

Before he had drawn so far away from her, before he had quit talking to her about that other world where he worked, he had told her that his boss was not concerned about getting the much needed motors out. He was interested only in how much he could make. He had bragged that he was making his while the making was good. By holding the motors up, by not passing them, he could make overtime. The motors were checked and rechecked needlessly just so he could make more money. This she could not understand. Shouldn't someone higher up, someone with authority, be told? Shouldn't they know what was going on? They knew and seemed to be as unconcerned as his boss. He became confused and frustrated. Gradually he had drawn into himself and it seemed ages since they had talked together. He came home and crawled into bed, crawled in beside her with hardly a word and was asleep immediately. At times when she was equally as tired, she was barely aware of him being near her. When had he whispered good-night or kissed her? Most of the time she was glad to be left alone with her weariness, but now as she thought about him an ache of loneliness edged in beside her physical exhaustion; she bowed her head and closed her eyes as if to shut out what she did not want to see, but closing her eyes did not stop the workings of her mind.

Most of the girls and women in his department had never worked before, were earning money for the first time, and darned good money at that. They were ~~petty~~ and vicious, checked each other's schedules carefully, complained about hours and what the others got, complained about anything and everything. That was what he did not want her mixed up in. It was not patriotism. She was convinced that that existed in very few of them, it was a craze for money, it was new to them and became

like a disease that flushed their faces with fever. It gave them a feeling they had never known before, a feeling of importance and of independence. They were free of some of the responsibilities of home, being a part of "the effort" was an excuse that many had been waiting for. She wondered, deep within herself, if she would not enjoy earning and feeling independent? It would not be so much what the money would buy, that was so restricted, but it would be the sense of not being dependent completely.

He had gone on the job proudly waving his little flag, now it hung limply along its staff. She hated seeing him so disillusioned and tired. Gradually, he had changed and now when he talked it was just like those he had criticized before, always it was about overtime and how much he made. He worked all kinds of strange hours, sixteen to eighteen hours a day if he could swing it, completely worn out, seldom talking. She had been so busy, too tired to question his coming and going, too tired to think about it until that call on the telephone. Wasn't she the naive one? She straightened on her chair and told herself she was not naive, she was just plain stupid. When she had finally gotten up the courage and had thought about it for awhile, she asked him about it, he had not answered, had just closed the bedroom door and gone to bed. She hated scenes and it was easy to let it slip by, but it ate at her, gnawed constantly at her being, like a cancerous growth it grew and ate away, weakening the very structure that it fed on. Wonder if he would be worried if he came home and she was not there? Wonder? Umm! More than once she had thought of going away, but had pushed the idea away, as one pushes aside something that is wrong, but

now it crowded up front, it shoved forward and she wondered why she had not thought of it before, well, she had, but not with such force. She had suppressed it, ignored it with the feeling that she would be cheating. Cheating? Suddenly it appealed to her.

Moving with effort, like a very old woman, she went into the bathroom and filled the tub. The tepid water relaxed her, she felt drowsy, but with grim determination she dried her body and resisted the temptation to crawl into bed.

Carefully she dressed herself, the clean dry clothes felt good. She did the best she could with her damp hair, powdered her face and carefully applied some lipstick. She found a pencil in the cupboard and wrote on a small piece of ruled paper "Have gone out." That was all. Should she add "with love?" She tapped her teeth with the pencil as she considered and then scrawled her name and left it beside the beans on the stove. She picked up her purse, stopped as she passed the door to the boys' room and listened. From the darkness came the sound of regular breathing. They were asleep.

She walked through the living room, stopped to straighten a cover on one of the tables and then quietly stepped out and closed the heavy front door behind her. Standing in the darkness on the porch was not a new experience, but somehow it was different. The shadows seemed deeper, the darkness more intense and the streetlight a little dimmer. She seldom went out alone at night and never that late. She had moved into this without thinking ahead and now stood bewildered. The familiar street seemed absolutely strange in the still darkness. There were no lights in the houses, not even the Bloom kids were up, which was unusual.

They had the reputation of staying up later than anyone else in the neighborhood. The trees along the walks cast darker shadows than she could remember. She had no place to go and stood looking first in one direction and then in the other. Finally she sat down on the steps, pushed her body tightly against the post and tried to think. Her mind was muddled and she felt afraid, afraid right there on her own front porch. Maybe she had better go back inside, but no, she would walk around to the back. It was cooler outside, felt good to her damp body, but it was so dark and still.

As she walked around the house she noticed a light in the upstairs window next door, that would be Carl's room. She wondered why he was up so late. She felt frightened and alone, but then Carl's light helped, at least someone else was awake besides her.

In the west, beyond the treetops, a lazy spread of heat lightning turned the sky a dirty orange color for a second and then plunged the world into greater darkness. The heavy fragrance of honeysuckle floated in the blackness. Her foot struck the stone at the turn of the walk. Halfway down towards the alley something dashed in front of her, a sudden movement in the blackness across the grass and into the garden. Quickly she turned back towards the house and stood by the back steps. It was a strange world in the darkness, this place that she knew so well in the daylight. The lightning changed the color of the world again and she glimpsed the flowers that grew around the steps. Suddenly there was nothing, it was like black velvet, soft and dense, pricked with quick insect sounds, nothing that she could identify. She felt her way, toe against back of step, to the top and sank down

with her back pressed hard against the door that she had closed and locked on the other side just a little while ago. The steps were warm, from the heat of the day, and tiny granulars of sand stuck to her moist palms.

The smell of damp earth reached out to her from the garden, their Victory garden! She and the boys spent most of their time there, weeding, cultivating, and gathering. Good kids, she thought, good workers. She smiled to herself with pride. They had watered it thoroughly just after sundown.

She thought of the tulips, the roses, the picnics, the trips up into the country when they could get gasoline, the smooth lawn; it had all been plowed under. They had decided that a garden would help stretch the ration stamps. It was difficult to feed two growing boys with what they could get with their limited rations. Kids at their age were always hungry. Kids' stomachs don't understand about wars and shortages. The large lush garden was supplying them with fresh vegetables and she was canning all they didn't eat. She thought of all of the fruit that was rotting in the orchards, just laying on the ground under the trees, under a blanket of happy bees and insects who gorged themselves, rotting because there was not sugar to can it. Such a shame she thought with a sorry shake of her head.

She slipped her shoes off and the insides stuck to her feet. She eased the insoles back and patted them into shape. Her feet were swollen and the night air felt like a caress to them. It would feel good to have hose again someday and not have her feet sticking to her shoes. And no more leg make-up! It was so messy and rubbed off onto

her skirts. It was pure hell trying to paint seams down the backs of her legs. A cricket sounded nearby and the steps seemed to be getting harder.

Lightning flashed again, reflected off a great bank of thunderheads in the north. A siren shrieked, she could hear the rush of the machine that carried it through the stillness in the night. She'd have to spray the beans tomorrow, she'd found some bean beetles on the underside of the leaves that day. They were harmless looking things, like small green ladybugs, but they could ruin a bean patch over night with their soft yellow offspring. Another siren, pitched higher than the first one raced across Thirtieth Street, soaring up and down as if in agony. The lightning flashed dimly and the clouds piled one on another in the north. A slight breeze moved amongst the leaves on the tree in the yard next door, it made a hushed sound and she pressed her body tighter against the door. From across the hedge came the angry snarl of a cat and she turned cold. She shifted her position and her foot struck one of her shoes. Her awful old shoes! She needed new ones, but there were not enough stamps to go around so she would have to wait. The boys were hard on theirs. Maybe she could swap some stamps with someone who didn't have kids.

Soft restless sounds came from the garage and she wondered what was disturbing the chickens. Surely they would not . . . just thinking about it made her sick at her stomach. When they could not get tires and gasoline was rationed, they had sold the car and turned the garage into a chicken house. Right there in what was strictly a residential

district they were raising chickens!! It would not have been permitted a few years back, but the war had changed everything. A week ago she had found one on the floor dead, a beautiful big pullet with its insides gone. She recalled her surprise and sick feeling. There had been no blood nor mess, it was clean and stiff on the floor. There had been several more, all dead and with their tail ends eaten out and the insides gone. The other chickens walked around, scratching and picking in the straw as if nothing was wrong, as if nothing had happened while she had stood nauseated and disgusted. There had been another that day. Tomorrow she would cover the windows with red paper, someone had told her that that would stop them killing each other. Thunder rumbled in the distance, like far away guns and she wondered if that was the way it sounded on the battlefields.

She must have dozed. Suddenly she was aware of a car in the alley, back of the garage. It sat there for a while with its motor running, a door closed quietly and it started up and moved away. A dark form moved through the gate, passed the garage and came towards her in the darkness. She straightened up with fear, pushed tightly against the door as panic surged through her body and grabbed at her throat. Rigid she sat, holding her breath, her heart pounding within her chest. She caught her breath as she recognized his familiar steps, it was his dog-tired gait. It was the only one she heard anymore. But why the alley? It had never occurred to her that he came home that way.

What if he saw her? What if the lightning flashed now? Panic seized her again and she sucked in her breath. He plodded past in the darkness, less than three feet from her and continued around to the front of the house. She waited, tense.

The kitchen light flashed on, lighted a square on the walk beyond the steps where she sat. The refrigerator door opened and closed. All was still. Had he found her note? What was he thinking? Did he wonder where she was? Was he worried? Thoughts ran rampant through her mind and then the light at the foot of the steps was gone and she went limp. Whose car was that?

She started up and stared into the dark, unable to understand where she was. She had dozed and her neck was stiff, it hurt when she straightened her head. She felt clammy and chilled. What time was it? How long had she slept? There were no sounds, nothing stirred, there was no lightning. The world was nothing but quiet darkness. Her mind came to with the suddenness of a flash of light. Would he be waiting for her?

Stiffly she got to her feet, gathered up her shoes and purse, walked to the front of the house and let herself in. The light from the streetlight showed her that the living room was empty he was not waiting. She felt her way through to the kitchen and turned the small light on above the stove. Her note lay on the table near an empty glass.

Slowly she walked to the bedroom door and paused. From the bed came the sound of heavy breathing he slept soundly.

THE MOTHER SITTER

THE MOTHER SITTER

With obvious reluctance she moved her hand across the page and with her misshapen finger marked the place where she had been reading. Her jaws set and her eyes narrowed, ever so slightly, as the relaxed expression vanished from her face. That tone, that monotonous tone that she just could not get used to, had ceased abruptly. At first it had nearly driven her mad. She slowly raised her eyes without moving her head and watched the woman across the room, sitting stiffly erect on the edge of the large chair, her feet wide apart, set squarely on the floor. The delicate pink of her scalp showed through her thin white hair as she bowed forward, concentrating on the open handbag in her lap. She slowly raised her head, looked around, child like, smiled a silly smile at her daughter and slowly drew a glove from within the bag, examined it thoughtfully, as if it were something new, something she had never seen before. She slipped it on her hand and gently fitted it down between each finger, checked the stitching and then pulled it off, one finger at a time, folded it carefully, the thumb across the palm, patted it lovingly and laid it beside her on the chair. There were two others of different colors that seemed to pass her inspection that she laid on top of the first one.

Elizabeth returned to her reading, knowing exactly what would follow. There were folded paper napkins, two folding metal drinking cups, one green, one gold, some cheap brooches with sparkly stones, handkerchiefs, folded envelopes and several squares of blue and white gingham. It was

a ritual that she observed every day, sometimes several times a day. Suddenly it was quiet, there was no sound of slow movement and Elizabeth looked across at her mother as she drew something from the bag and held it up near her eyes, smiled a contented smile and looked away. Her daughter watched without raising her head as the older woman turned a teaspoon for closer inspection.

"Oh, no, Mamma!" Consternation edged her voice. "You didn't?" But she knew she had, had taken another teaspoon. "You know you shouldn't."

"It's mine." She shook her head defiantly and grasped it in her hand with her fingers tight around the handle. The blue veins stood out on the backs of her bony gray-white hands like knotted chords, tangled with brown splotches. She drew it closely to her flat bosom and held it securely. Her short white hair framed her thin face. The skin was drawn tightly over her nose, looked so transparent one wondered if he could not see through it. Like that on her hands, it looked bloodless. Once there had been some fullness in her cheeks, but that was gone now, as was the natural pinkness, and the skin sagged in loose folds around her jowls like deflated balloons. Her eyes were pale gray, weak, bewildered, and most of the time did not seem to focus correctly.

At eighty seven her world was strange, a world disconnected and not hanging straight. It was a world of snatched memories, flashes of another time in life that involved her family, its hardships and frustrations. She was in communion with unreal people and people who did not exist to those around her. It was confused and topsy-turvy. It had been a slow process, a gradual loss of being part of the world in which she lived, she was no longer a part of what everyone called reality.

At first she had been forgetful and that eased gradually into absolute loss of identification. She no longer knew who she was nor could she recognize those with whom she lived.

"It's mine. See . . . see the handle . . . it's mine!" She nodded her head as if that settled the discussion. She held it closely, her knuckles white.

"See it's mine . . . mine."

"Oh, dear God." Elizabeth choked back the urge to cry and take the spoon away. It would mean nothing to tell her mother it was wrong or that it was not hers. There were five now that she had taken, secreted away down in that purse even though she had watched her so closely.

"It's stealing to take things that do not belong to you," her mother had said sternly one day many years ago when she was quite young.

"But they were outside the fence, Mamma. They don't belong to anyone."

"They do belong to someone. You got these at Mrs. Hayes, didn't you?"

She had hung her head and confessed.

"You took something that wasn't yours. You stole, Betty." They were on the back porch and the child stood between her mother's knees.

"Even if it's as little as a pin and it does not belong to you and you take it, you're stealing. It is wrong to steal." She drew it out and the child felt as if she were disgraced.

"Now, you march right back to where you got them, go up to the door and tell Mrs. Hayes that you took her apples and that you are sorry. Say that you will never do it again. I am ashamed of you, Betty."

She recalled that her mother had walked to the back gate and held it open for her. She had walked slowly down the alley dreading the ordeal

of apologizing. Mrs. Hayes had insisted that she keep the stolen apples, that she was a good girl to bring them back and if she wanted any to come to the door and ask for them. She had walked toward home confused about what to do with the two red apples. She took a few bites out of one, but it didn't taste so good. She threw them into the bushes by a fence, she knew she could not return home with them. A soft smile spread over her face and she wondered if her mother had smiled years ago as she stood by the gate and watched her daughter amble down the alley.

Other spoons had been lifted from the depths of the handbag, gripped in her tight fist and claimed to be her own. She could not return them because she was not sure where they had come from. They often stopped for coffee at various places when she took her mother for short rides in the afternoon and if they met friends she often forgot to watch every minute. After the first two she had planned to watch carefully, but there were times when visiting that she forgot. She had never seen her take anything. She must have wrapped them in her napkin. It might be days before she showed them and there was no way for her to check the contents of the bag, her mother had it with her constantly, even slept with it.

The monotonous tone started up again, it must have been her mother's attempt to sing but it was irritating, like one of those rattles or squeaks that suddenly develops as you drive along the highway. You move this, jiggle that, open compartments, and close them, check everything within reach and the sound continues, driving you to distraction. It is not a great thing and you feel sure it is nothing serious, but it grates on your nerves until you feel like screaming. She had tried

talking to her mother to stop the tone, but it started up again as soon as she stopped talking or gave over to a thin reedy whistling that was still more irritating. She had tried soft music, but her mother put her hands over her ears as if it hurt, actually caused her pain. Finally, she endured, there was no escape.

"Mamma, would you like me to keep your spoon?"

"Spoon? What spoon?" She had forgotten so quickly.

"The one there in your lap, the one you were looking at."

"Spoon?" She looked bewildered as she searched for it in the bag.

"It's there in your lap."

"This?" She held it out for her daughter.

"I'll keep it for you with the others, is that all right?"

She smiled as she handed it over and promptly forgot all about it.

In a short while she began putting her treasures back into the bag. She worked diligently at folding and unfolding, placing and moving, humming her tone softly to herself.

When everything was back in place she arose from the chair, tottered a bit until she established her balance and said something about there being so much to do and walked slowly into her bedroom. Elizabeth sat staring down at her book, not reading, just thinking. She did a lot of thinking lately, shut up with her aged mother. Her mind wandered back to the years when she was free, free to come and go without all of the trouble involved in getting someone to stay with her failing mother. Just to walk out, to feel free, to come back leisurely, when she wanted to. How she longed for that freedom again.

"I think I'll go see the girls." She had not heard her mother return and was startled out of her reverie.

"What do you mean? What girls?" She had to adjust to the game she played. Suddenly she couldn't think to herself.

"Oh, you know," she seemed disturbed that the other woman did not know. "You know . . . Ruby and Maude." She mumbled beneath her breath something her daughter did not quite understand.

"They moved away. They are not around here anymore."

"Pshaw, you don't say." She was puzzled. "Moved away?" She was silent as she searched for an explanation.

"They were there yesterday."

"No, not yesterday. You didn't go there yesterday . . . we went for a ride into the country or was it to the grocery? Don't you remember?"

Often she took her mother to the grocery with her and locked her in the car. She wasn't able to unlock the doors and could not wander away.

"A ride?" She did not remember, confused she stood with her gloves on, sweater buttoned up under chin, squinting at her daughter in disbelief.

"Here, let me help you, you don't need that sweater on in here."

"But Ruby and Maude?"

"We'll go there some other day." Ruby and Maude! They were friends from way back and had been dead for a long time. Her mother stood still while she unbuttoned the sweater for her and helped her remove it and two others beneath it.

"Now, take off your gloves and we'll go to the bathroom. Don't you have to go?"

"I'm just too busy . . . there is so much to get done." She muttered and tried to shake her way clear of the directing hands as she was led into the bathroom. There was the usual tussle with her clothes, her complaints about being wiped and the startled look at the sound of the toilet being flushed.

"There now." Elizabeth pulled her clothes down, washed her hands and gently steered her back into the living room. The old lady roamed around the room examining everything and making her tone. She stopped by the front window, moved from one side to the other, peered out as if expecting someone. She pressed nearer and nearer to the pane until her face was against the glass. She drummed on the sill with her phantom-like fingers, her lips made wet marks on the glass. Suddenly she straightened up, was still as she gazed toward the street. It was a lane and a cloud of dust, reddish colored dust, arose and enveloped a horse and buggy as it turned toward the house. There was a beautiful roan stepping along sprightly. The driver was a handsome young man who handled the reins expertly. He wore a straw sailor hat, high collar and linen jacket. A brisk wind moved the dust away quickly and she watched him climb down. He stood out sharply in her view. She reached up to push back a lock of dark brown hair and then gently pulled her dress tightly over her full breasts. As he looked toward the window he saw her and smiled, removed his hat and gave it a quick flip in her direction. The wind suddenly changed, the red dust hid him from her sight and it all became gray nothing.

"Where is James?" She turned slightly. "Why doesn't he come home?" She faced her daughter.

"He'll come soon, Mamma."

"But, where is he?"

"He'll come soon." This had also become a game, a part of a routine. There were few days when she did not ask about Jim, her husband. He had died six years ago and Elizabeth had tried at first to explain to her what had happened, but she could not understand and it was easier to put her off with some little excuse for his absence. After fifty four years she expected him to come home to her. At first it had been very hard, with her grief so fresh, and then it was easy to just be quite vague.

Once Mamma had become insistent that they go visit her mother and in a thoughtless moment Elizabeth had said she had been dead for years. The word "dead" seemed to reach into the depths that hadn't been reached with the facts of her husband's death and she cried for five minutes.

"Why hadn't someone told her?" she sobbed and Elizabeth felt miserable. She hadn't meant to speak so truthfully, it had slipped out, she felt mean and from then on was careful, guarded everything she said. At times the aging woman seemed to understand more clearly than at other times. Often she could recall clearly for a very short while happenings of years ago, but what happened yesterday or ten minutes before were completely forgotten.

The day wore on, like hundreds of days before and Mamma dozed in her chair. The younger woman laid her book down and looked across at the sleeping woman. On the table just back of her were gathered all of the pictures of the family. Her brother and his wife, her sister with her family, Jim, her father, and the picture of her at the time of her retirement. They all still lived except her father, but the respon-

sibility of caring for Mamma had been draped over her shoulders like a heavy mantle. Suddenly she felt bitter and put-upon. Why was she the one? The others were free, they lived their lives as they chose, they didn't have to make arrangements days in advance to go to the grocery. A great lump rose in her throat and tears smarted under her eyelids. Just to walk out the door! Just once to do something suddenly, on the spur of the moment. She thought of the wet beds, the soiled underclothes, the spilled food, that horrible monotonous tone, that reedy whistle and hated, deeply hated, the sleeping woman. Why did she live on? Why hadn't she died instead of James, her father? He had been so active, so alert, interested in so many things, how he had enjoyed football games, how proud he was of his garden! And he had died and she lived on no, it wasn't living . . . she existed. Why . . . why . . . why? The tears ran down her cheeks and she sobbed.

Slowly the sleeping woman stirred in her chair and opened her dull weak eyes. Elizabeth brushed the tears away and forced a smile around her lips, but her eyes were cold and hard as she watched.

"Oh, dear God! She is so helpless and she is all I have and I wished she was dead. What kind of person am I?"

"Mamma, are you all right? I'm sorry for some of the things I think . . . but it is rough. I hope you understand, but damn it, I know you don't . . . you don't understand anything, you just go on living and I go on dying . . . that's what it is . . . I go . . on . . . dying."

The white crepe-like lids flickered and Mamma slept again while her daughter wept convulsively. Trapped . . . trapped. Like the drip of a faucet in the night it wore away her patience, nibbled at her mind and then she reproached herself. She was selfish, unloving, she didn't appreciate all her mother had done for her . . . round and round it twirled in her mind until she could stand the inactivity no longer and she walked the floor while her mother snored, loose little flutterings in her throat. Gradually she quieted down and went into the kitchen to prepare the evening meal.

Mamma dabbled at eating, toyed with her food, dribbled coffee all over her baby plate.

"No, Mamma, don't put your coffee on the potatoes. Go ahead and eat while it's warm. Aren't you hungry?" With her fork she forced food into her mother's mouth and she chewed and chewed.

"Swallow it, Mamma."

"Come on, open up." The older woman clamped her teeth on the fork and the sound of her teeth on the metal made chills run down her back.

Suddenly Mamma tightened her lips and would have no more.

"Come on, now, it's good," Elizabeth coaxed, but to no avail. She knew from experience that there was no need to try to force her to eat. She moved everything out of reach for her mother and finished her dinner. When she had finished and cleared the table, she filled the dishpan at the sink in the kitchen. Her eyes were still red and swollen from her violent crying. The suds built up high into white peaks as she swished her hands in the soapy warm water, the soft warmth felt good to her enlarged knuckles and twisted fingers. There were times when the ache

was almost more than she could stand and the warm water was soothing. Her mind wandered as she did the dishes and her mother padded around behind her.

Her retirement dinner had been so gay and wonderful. Everyone had said she had looked so pretty, she had not been told that often. She had gone all out for the occasion, one did not retire but once. She had had her hair done in the latest style, had had a rinse put on it and bought a lovely new dress. She had put in thirty years of very hard work in that office and there had been few compliments, no encouragement, but when she was quitting they couldn't say enough nice things to her. Why couldn't they have been a bit kinder to her while she was working? Why had she stayed on all of those years? Why hadn't she gone away or to some other work? She admitted to herself that she had little confidence in her ability and was afraid of change. In all those years she had taken their guff, never a word back for fear of losing her job. After it was over she had missed working, mostly the association with the girls, the coming and going. There had been good times along with the bad and all of the dreams of what she would do when she retired. Her father died very suddenly two months before she was to retire and all of her dreams that for years she had held to seemed to have been buried with him. What else could she do but take over the care of her mother?

Like a haunt she moved around in back of her and Elizabeth thought it was not that she did not love her, she did, but it just kept going on and on and on. She had felt very noble, dedicated, when she decided to go ahead and retire so she could care for her after Jim was gone, but

she had no idea what all it involved, she had not thought that there would be no help from any of the others. They always said they had others to think of and she did not. What could she do?

She moved her hands in the warm water and thought of the picnics they had had when her parents were young and the children growing up. Mamma had loved them and made it fun for everyone. And the trip to see her grandparents in California when she had been about twelve! She smiled as she remembered sleeping in a tent along the side of the road. That had been such fun and she hadn't thought about it for a long time.

She gaze out across the lawn and hedge into the soft yellow glow of late afternoon. Her mother diligently rubbed the table top with a dish towel and when she had finished her work walked toward the back door and stood in the warm glow, towel in hand, felt the cool breeze across her face.

Two girls and a boy were playing in the cleared space back of the poorly constructed shack where they lived during the summer. Their shouts and laughter made her feel less lonely.

"You're It, Mary."

Jack raced away through the sage that grew everywhere. Mary, red faced and out of breath, ran ahead of her older sister Elizabeth, screaming.

"You'd better come in now, Kids. Time for supper." The sun faded and she lost the children in the deep shadows.

Homesteading was not easy, it was lonely and often frightening, all of that great expanse of flat land and sky. Jim working in town to

provide food and supplies, coming out on weekends to bring them. Just the woman and the children in between times. They had filed on a claim and it was required that someone be on it for three months of the year. From the first of June until September she and the children lived there. She longed for home and to be able to walk along the streets and visit with her friends and neighbors.

Slowly the older woman turned and stood gazing at the woman by the sink.

"Who's Elizabeth?"

"I'm Elizabeth, Mamma."

She dully looked at her, disbelief showed on her face. Elizabeth was a child.

"And Jack and Mary?" She mumbled as she waited. Betty was used to her way of talking and understood.

"Oh, Mamma! You remembered!" She grabbed her mother and hugged her excitedly, stood back at arms length and beamed. Maybe her mind was clearing up.

"And that other woman?"

"Other woman?"

"She was here wasn't she?"

"Just you and me . . . no one else."

"Oh," it was a resigned sound, she was bewildered again, lost again, and her daughter's enthusiasm ebbed away.

Slowly she dried and stacked the dishes on the shelves, emptied the dishpan, hung the towels neatly on a rod by the door and stood back of her mother looking out towards where her father's garden had been.

Grass and weeds had taken over and the irrigation ditch no longer surged and gurgled.

How had her mother ever gotten over there without falling? She had thought about it many times.

They had been very busy at the office when the call came from their neighbor that she had better come home. It had been a frightening drive because she had no idea what had happened, only that Mamma was at the neighbor's. She had fled across the garden, across the ditches, through the darkness, because some strange man was in their house bothering her. Her father sat in the kitchen unable to quite understand. She had pushed him away when he had tried to stop her from going out into the dark. He had followed her through the dark and she had cried out. When she was safely inside the other house, he had returned home and sat alone in the kitchen until Elizabeth had brought her home and put her to bed. He felt that maybe it was his fault and she tried to make him understand. A strange man . . . after all of those years.

Mamma moved away from the door and Elizabeth roused from her reverie. What if she had fallen in the water? What if Dad had fallen?

"I have to get busy." She gathered up her bag from a chair and walked out of the kitchen. In a short while she returned and announced that she was going to bed.

"It's so early."

"There's things to do."

"All right, if that's what you want. I'll help you."

"No, I can take care of myself."

"What about the bathroom?"

"No." She said it emphatically.

"But you haven't been for awhile. Come on."

Mamma sat and sat and finally Elizabeth helped her up and into her room. She acted like a pouty child, a stubborn child.

"Go away." She pushed the helping hands away.

"But, Mamma . . ."

"Go 'way." She was irritated.

The daughter could not get interested in her book and listened for noises in the bedroom. She flipped the pages and read what it said on the book jacket. No sound came from her mother's room and gradually she relaxed. After a couple of chapters she laid the book down and softly walked across the room. In the dim light she could see all the covers heaped on the floor, the sheets folded crazily on the chair and the pillows at the foot of the bed. The old woman lay on the mattress, her gown over her clothes, her shoes still on. She lay on her side with her knees drawn up, hugging the purse to her as if it were a child. She slept soundly in a spreading ring of strong urine.

"Oh, dear God." Elizabeth choked. "Not again. Twice in one day." She felt like striking her, lifted her hand and then let it drop to her side. If only she had gone to the bathroom. She shook her roughly and pulled at the purse.

"Come on, we have to clean you up. Mamma, Mamma." Her voice agonized.

She stripped her and bathed her, put on fresh clothes and the older woman whimpered. She removed the wet pads, remade the bed and helped

her mother back into it. Slowly she walked away, back to her book.

As she turned she noticed a reflection in the window and thought it was her mother who looked back at her. She straightened up, stood still, the white hair and her mother's face before a barren white wall reflected back at her. Startled, she realized that it was her own reflection that came back to her from the brittle, hard glass and on the other side was the fathomless darkness of the night. A chill of fright crept along her spine and she slowly pulled the chord to close the drapes and blot out what she had seen.

EAVEY

EAVEY

He stopped just short of the open door, raised his hand and leaned against the door casing; it felt warm to his palm. He stood in the midst of a pulsing world of shadows, a world of blurred movements in tones of gray and green. He closed his eyes slowly and fingered a small bit of grit that was held within layer on hard layer of paint, like a memory caught near the surface that worries and frets the conscience. As he leaned his head against his lifted arm, he wiped the perspiration from his face on his shirt sleeve and blinked his eyes. Slowly objects resumed their familiar shapes in the dim bedroom, where he and Martha slept; the bed in the corner, his mother's ceiling high walnut, wardrobe, the dresser, the chairs. On a narrow board attached to the wall was a row of hooks, his old brown sweater and garden work clothes hung there. The strip carpeting had muffled the sound of his arrival and neither woman was aware of his presence.

He felt strange, like an outsider, an interloper, as he waited by the door. Mattie was leaning over the figure on the bed, her round hips were toward him, they appeared to be tied together by the bow of her apron strings. He could not see what she was doing, so he waited. When she had finished, she straightened up, pulled her dress into place and eased herself down onto the stool at the side of the bed.

It had been a kitchen chair once, but the back was gone, had been broken off many years ago, no one could recall just how it had happened, but it was just the right height for sitting by the bed. Martha

had scrubbed off the accumulation of dust that had gathered over the years in the corner of the back porch and carried it into the front room. She faced away from him, slowly and rhythmically moving a large palmleaf fan over the woman who lay motionless with closed eyes.

The old fashioned folding-bed had been pulled out away from its usual place against the wall, leaving a bright colored rectangle of reds, greens, and browns on the floor across the corner where it always stood. The bed was huge and heavy, much too heavy for Martha to handle alone, so he had helped her move it when it had turned so hot a few weeks back. She had thought it would be cooler for Eavey, out where, if there was any breeze, it would blow across her.

The heavy green window blinds, with their tiny pricks of light flicked here and there, like stars in the dark sky at night, were drawn to within an inch of the bottoms of the long front windows. Dazzling gold shafts of sunshine blazed in the space between the blinds and the sills and flared on the worn carpeting. At the lone north window the blind was rolled up to the middle sash and the lace curtain was folded and pinned up. It hung limp and lifeless in the humid air.

The "front room," there were two front rooms, but this one was "the front room," served whatever need was at hand. It was on the northwest corner of the old house, the other one, to distinguish the two, was called "the living room," was on the other corner; both had doors that opened onto the front porch and a door leading into the rest of the house, but the one into which John now gazed could be closed, the room shut off from the rest of the house. It had served as parlor,

extra bedroom, sickroom and sewing room; had changed little during the years. In the corner, back of the door that led out to the front porch, stood a large picture of Peter Walker. The frame that held the picture was of natural wood with a decoration of twining leaves and it rested on an easle. Peter Walker was John's grandfather, the one who had served in the Civil War and had been shot in the Battle of Shiloh; it was the only distinction the family could claim. His mother had told and retold the story many times as it had been told to her by her father. Her voice always took on a strange tone when telling about it, a huskiness with little emotional quiverings at certain places and on special occasions she would produce from some hidden place the bullets that had been removed from his body. Once she had permitted John to hold them in his cupped hand.

Peter Walker's hair hung long to his shoulders, to the shoulders of his bluish uniform and his unnatural blue-green eyes stared across the room. He sat like a very young god watching the events, one after another, like flipped pages in the history of his family. He had watched John's mother Maggie stand in her new brown taffeta and promise to "love, honor and obey" Bill. She was strong willed like her mother and Bill was not man enough to stand up to her. He watched the old doctor whack the glistening bottom of tiny John, hanging by his heels in the strong hands of the trusted physician, that whack had brought about an intake of breath, life producing breath. There had been other children born there, John's brothers and sister and his children. He had peered through the dimness, behind drawn blinds, at two small white coffins containing a boy born two years after John and a

girl who had died a year later. He watched as quilting frames were set up and chattering women gossiped and stitched warm covers for their families. He had stared through the night at John and his bride Eavey and listened to her sobs at the close of their wedding day. He had watched groups gather around the stiff old reed organ with its red pedals, worn by the heels of those who pumped away as voices blended in song on birthdays and anniversaries. He sat like a silent god in blue with brass buttons.

John gazed at Martha's back and a surge of gentle emotion rose up within him. There was his blessed wife Martha, the mother, the good mother of his children, his kind and willing mate. She was taking such good care of Eavey. She was just plain good. A few tendrils of graying hair had escaped the comb on the back of her head and curled on her damp neck. Her gingham dress was a deeper blue where it clung to the damp flesh across her shoulders.

A large fly zoomed across the room, the sound brought him out of his reverie with a start. It was like a smooth determined motor as it circled the room several times and then banged against the screen door. Martha laid the fan down and walked swiftly across the floor, her skirts made a rustling sound as she moved. ^{\$-4} He hated flies, all kinds of bugs, but flies were the worst and large green ones were the worst and this was a very large green one. He wondered where her ever present flyswatter was and then recalled that she never used it when Eavey was sleeping.

Slowly and carefully she opened the screen door, did not startle the fly into flight and with a quick swish of her apron shooed the pest outside. Quietly she slipped the hook into the eye on the door casing

and stood looking out into the brightness of the front yard. As she turned to cross back to her position by the bed she was startled by the blurred figure standing in the dimness just beyond the door. She blinked her eyes and then smiled as she walked towards him. She raised her face and he tenderly took it between his roughened hands and looked into her eyes.

"Mattie . . . Mattie" he said softly, huskily, and kissed her. They stood close together, absorbed in each other. He started to speak, but she shook her head slightly and signaled him to be quiet by placing her finger on her lips. He glanced at the woman on the bed and followed his wife into the room. The faint odor of iodiform and soap seemed to fill the air as he stood looking down at the still woman who lay small and ivory colored, her shrunken face mummy-like on the white pillow. Martha stood quietly by the broken chair. She had thought it might be cooler at the foot of the bed and had turned Eavey so that she lay with her head where her feet should have been. She had moved her that morning before the doctor came.

Eavey lay motionless, it was hard to tell whether she was breathing or not, but by watching carefully he could detect an almost imperceptible rise and fall of her flat chest as she breathed slowly and without depth. Her long neatly braided hair made strange crooked designs beside her dull face. Her lips were pressed thin and colorless, like a harsh mark across her lower face, the closed eyes lay in sunken sockets.

John leaned down and stroked her bony hand; looked at Martha and smiled.

"Eavey." He said it softly; she showed no awareness of him.

"Eavey," he said again leaning closer to her and pressing her hand beneath his, ever so lightly. "How are you today?" He used a coaxing tone, the kind one uses when speaking to children.

How could one change so much, even with the passing of years? How could this be the same person he had known years ago? He had changed, he had only to look in the mirror to see how much. His hair was thin on the top and whiter along the edges. There were new creases around his eyes and mouth, the skin on his jowls sagged a bit. He realized that he did not snap back so readily after working in the garden. He was stiff in his joints in the morning when he first got up, but they limbered up after he moved around for awhile. He liked to doze in his chair and to go to bed earlier, he preferred routine, knowing what to expect next, he had grown to dislike surprises. He loved being comfortable. This change in Eavey was not like the changes in him and Martha, changes that had come about so gradually that he was hardly aware of them. Hers was a change that had been flung at him, suddenly thrown in his face, one that had taken place over the years when he had not seen her. When they had parted she was still young and pretty, even though grim and disillusioned. When he had first brought her to this house to live she had fairly sparkled, was radiant with youth and love . . . his beautiful little wife, his first real love, but that was years ago. When he had carried her in this time, through the very same door, it was hard to believe that it was the same person. Maybe she was not the same person. Her name was the same, she had never remarried, had taken care of herself over the years

by working at whatever she could find to do, had taken in sewing, worked as housekeeper for friends when they needed her, but had grown farther and farther away from the stream of life in their small town, had kept more and more to herself. Her folks had all died and she had no one to look after her. He had promised to do that many years ago when they were young and still felt a bit of an obligation.

All of those thoughts rambled through his mind as he leaned close to her and spoke again. Martha watched and picked up the fan and he felt cool air pass over him. Mattie raised her eyes to meet his and nodded her head. Eavey's eyes were struggling to open, the lids moved ever so slightly. Across some deep cravasse his voice had reached her. Martha laid the fan down on the bed and squeezed a washcloth from a basin of water that stood on a table near the head of the bed. Gently she sponged the drawn face and hot hands. They waited. The eyes opened slowly, dull and not in focus.

"How are you feeling today?"

There was a slight change of expression that may have been her attempt to smile. It flitted across her face and then her eyes closed and her face settled into the same imperturable mask that she had worn since the doctor had spoken to her that morning. Carefully he laid her hand beside her on the bed. Because of the heat she lay with no cover over her and he glanced down at her huge ankles, swollen so much they looked as if they might burst, the skin drawn taut and white, ashy white, a lifeless color.

"Poor thing . . . poor little thing." He intoned it like a benediction

as he straightened up, placing his hand at the small of his back. They faced each other across the bed for awhile and there still was no sign of awareness. He walked around to where Martha stood and put his hand on hers.

"Couldn't we go outside for a little while?"

"I sort of hate to leave her alone."

"We'll be only a few steps from her and it will be good for you.

Come, on, Mattie." His voice was low.

He followed her through the bedroom, across the corner of the living room and into the kitchen. His lunch bucket sat where he had put it when he came home, on the kitchen table near several cans of tomatoes cooling on a breadboard. She stopped to pick it up.

"No, that can wait." He opened the screen door. "Let's sit on the porch."

She stepped past him, out through the opened door and eased herself down on the top step, leaned against the house. Carefully she pulled her skirts around her and straightened her apron. He eased down opposite her with his back against the post that supported the roof. They relaxed in the shady humid silence of the late afternoon amid the mixed fragrances from the growing vegetables and flowers. The quietness seemed to come in waves to beat on their ears, to close in with vibrations, disturbing undercurrents. They sat, each with his own thoughts, far apart, mulling, thinking and questioning.

"She's bad, John." Martha's voice sounded strange, even to herself.

"Dr. Doerr says it can be anytime . . . just anytime."

"He was here again today?" He was surprised.

"Yes, her fever is away up and with it so hot . . . " Her voice trailed off and she fanned herself with the edge of her apron and pushed her damp hair back from her forehead.

"What else did he say?"

"About all we can do is keep her comfortable." She waited for him to say something, but he was silent. "She seemed alert and awake while he was here and from what he said to her she must know what is wrong."

"She's known all along, I'm sure."

"No, I don't think so." She shook her head slightly. "I believe she was convinced that the operation a year ago got it all."

"How can anyone not guess? It's the very first thing that pops into your head." He turned the ring on his finger and gazed into the pale sky to the east. "What a horrible waste . . . such an awful disease." An ant crawled up the toe of his shoe and he flung it off with a quick movement of his foot and wondered if they had diseases.

"It's terrible . . . it eats away. It gnaws and consumes, it's sneaky. You don't know about it until it's too late." They sat still, each with his own thoughts.

"What was it you said he said?"

"Who?"

"Doctor Doerr. Who else?"

"Well," she took a deep breath, paused and went on. "He was looking at those awful welts, the worst one is on her neck, about here." She marked the place with her finger on her own neck. "And she asked if there'd have to be another operation. You know what I think? I think he must have thought she should know and very still like, he

said it wouldn't do any good . . . said it had gone too far." She gulped. "I could have just died." She cleared her throat and continued. "She was so still for a long time and then she looked up into his face and said 'Oh?'" She waited watching her husband. He continued looking into the eastern sky.

"He patted her hand and said 'Yes'. That was all." Again she waited.

"She did say something else, it seemed a bit strange. She said 'Thank you'. She hasn't said a word since, just lays there with her eyes closed, quiet and hardly breathing, like she's just waiting." She sighed deeply. "He gave her a shot of some kind before he left, maybe that's why she is so still."

He lowered his head and rubbed his hands together, back and forth.

"Mattie, is this awfully hard on you?" He watched her as she worked at making up her mind. She was not given to a lot of talk and never answered quickly.

"No," she drawled. "Most of the time it is real easy." She lowered her head and traced the stitching on her apron with her thumb nail.

"Sometimes I think I can't stand it . . . just can't stand it." She raised her head and looked at him with haunted eyes. Maybe she should not be so frank. "It's not the extra work, it's something else." Her voice was low, so low he could hardly hear her. "I just can't put my finger on it."

He moved slightly, changed his position, extended each leg, one at a time, and placed his feet back squarely on the steps.

"You know what Sam said today?" There was a lilt to his voice and he didn't wait for her answer. "He said his Jenn would never do what you are doing." His eyes were bright as he looked at her, his face

sober. He continued "I just said 'She's not my Martha.'"

She raised her head and looked straight into his eyes and half smiled, a strained twist on her lips.

"Wish I was half as good as you make out."

"You are . . . and more."

She waved her hand above a fly that had settled on her arm to frighten it away and looked across the garden.

"Everybody in town thinks it's mighty strange, us bringing her here."

"Everybody in town?" A knowing expression passed over his face.

"Betty been here?"

She nodded. "She stopped by at noon with some soup for Eavy and she thinks I'm being put upon."

He counted the rows of beans and she knew what he was thinking. He considered her friend Betty a busy-body and a gossip, she had never been able to convince him that she was just interested in everybody and everything. She knew that he thought Betty was an aggravating influence and wished she would not come around. He had said so many times.

"I explained to her how we talked it all over and agreed on what we're doing."

"Were you able to make her understand how we feel?"

"I tried." She avoided his eyes.

"Are you sorry we brought her here?"

"I feel mighty sorry for her with no one to watch out for her, not one living soul." She pulled the edge of her apron back and forth between her fingers, flattened the hem and folded it under, then continued, "But there are times, like when you talk so tender to her and hold her hand that I'd like to scream." She bowed with a feeling of shame for how

she felt.

"Mattie . . . Mattie." He looked at her and shook his head, just as she had seen him do when talking to the children.

"You know, John, after we talked it all over I really wanted to bring her here and take care of her, but when you carried her through that front door, I thought I just couldn't stand it."

"Why didn't you tell me how you felt?" His face was drawn and set. "I could have gotten someone else to take care of her."

"That wouldn't be right and you wanted her here . . . and it's just sometimes that I feel that way." She was upset and nervous.

"But I wanted you to want her here."

"I guess I did until everybody started talking."

"Everybody? You mean Betty." He waited. "This is our business, not Betty's or Sam's or anybody's. This was all between you and me and I thought it was agreeable." He paused and closed his eyes. "I didn't hold her hand to hurt or upset you, you know that, don't you?"

"I want to know that." She almost whispered. Her voice was so low it was like a struggle in her throat.

"When we went to see her that first time after you had heard how sick she was and we found her in that awful little room trying to take care of herself, I felt like I couldn't do enough for her and after today I feel kind of mean begrudging her anything." She turned away, then with a slight jerk added, "But it bothers me."

"It needn't. You know how I feel towards you. We've had so much together and she's had so little."

"That's what I mean by begrudging her."

"You know when I looked at her awhile ago, I had the feeling that she was already gone, she doesn't seem to be alive." Everything in the garden was more intensely colored, darkened by the shadow of the house.

"Have you ever needed to touch something real, something solid, something like somebody's hand that you can hold onto?"

She nodded her head and quietly said, "Many's the time."

"It's mighty reassuring to feel a strong hand when nothing seems right or for real." He clasped his hands. "In all these years that we have been together you've been that something to me, solid, warm, and real, something for me to reach out to and clutch onto."

There was a long silence and he continued, "There are things a man has to do sometimes, just has to do." His voice was low and hoarse. "You have no reason to begrudge Eavey the clasp of a hand, a bit of warmth that you take for granted." Contriteness saturated her whole being. "She has known very little of that, I'm sure."

Overripe plums plopped on the ground beneath the tree at the end of the porch, disturbing the bees that gorged themselves on the honey-like juices. There was a low humming as they worked over the mellow, soft, bursted fruit, flitting from one to another. A robin strutted across the grass like a deacon reared back in his brown vest.

They both remained quiet for what seemed a long time, she felt that she had herself under control. Once when she had interrupted him as he was telling about his life with Eavey, she had asked him why he tortured himself by recalling his unhappiness. She recalled that he had said, "I have to talk about it" and had set his jaws, squinted his eyes as if narrowing the view, that it was too much to look at

with his eyes wide open.

"I want you to know how I feel," he had said. "You women are so touchy about things. You skirt around, never get down to the core, never settle things, you always leave ends dangling, hanging in mid-air. You always turn me off when I want to talk about this and get it off my chest, get it settled in my mind for good. How will you know, how will you understand how I feel if you don't hear me out?" His hands tightened into tight fists. "How?" He had buried his head in his hands.

"~~Martha~~ Martha, how will you ever know?" That was it, he had never tried to talk about it again.

The memory caused her to swallow hard and feel resentment toward the man who was at times a stranger to her. She could see his brown skin, tanned from hours in the garden. It contrasted sharply against his whitening hair which he was ~~wearing~~ longer now that it was thinner on the top. She could see what he called his "drake tails" that curled just above his collar. She recalled how handsome he had been when she had first met him; he was still handsome, a bit stooped and thickened around his middle, but his eyes were bright, his hands steady, his step sure. He had worked hard all of his life, still spent hours in the garden after a full day at the mill. This was the man she could see, the man sitting near her, this was the man those he worked with saw, this was the man their friends saw, but what about the moody stranger who appeared ever so often who confused and flustered her with moods she could not understand? Here was a stranger others did not see. When she thought she knew and understood him, he suddenly

changed, became melancholy and morose, sat and said nothing, made her feel uncertain in his presence. Then she worried about having said something that had brought on his "spell." Often he left in the morning in high spirits and returned in the late afternoon downcast and there was no shaking him loose from his "blues". Gradually they wore off, but life was miserable while they lasted; she felt guilty, as if it was her fault that he felt low. She looked at him now and wondered just how much she was expected to take. She was a patient person, but there were times when it wore thin. He locked his fingers together and sighed. Maybe she should have listened to him time after time. He had gone over some of it so often that she knew it by heart. It upset him so much she thought she was doing him a kindness to stop it.

"I think I'd better check on Eavey." She rose slowly and entered the house. He was just as she had left him when she returned.

"She's just like we left her. I turned her." She sat down on the top step where she had been.

In his mind he could see Eavey and himself as very young children: their mothers glowing with pride as they played together. His mother and hers had grown up together, were very good friends, but were as different as two women could be and he often had wondered what held them so closely together.

Ma was as plain as could be, a meat and potatoes kind of person who cared little for pretty clothes, seldom went anyplace, except to see relatives or someone ill. She was not sociable and he recognized that trait in himself.

Eavey's mother was gay and fixey, always wore pretty, gaily, colored clothes, with her hair curled high on her head. Eavey was like her mother and he thought that he might have hoped she would bring him to a life different from the one he was used to. He wanted more than his folks had had. Eavey was pretty and gay, loved to wear pretty clothes and dance. How she loved to dance and he had never danced a step in all of his life.

He returned to reality and listened to the humming of the bees. They sounded so busy and contented.

A leggy girl flashed on his mind, she seemed all legs, eyes and long braids. There had been picnics and parties, they had always gone together. It had been taken for granted that he would watch out for her, but no one seemed to think about them growing up and falling in love.

He glanced at his wife, her face showed no emotion. She was planning what she would do the next day.

And suddenly in his mind they were no longer children, her long legs were hidden by long skirts and her braids were coiled high on her head like a crown. They were in love without actually knowing the meaning of love. It was a new experience and they loved being in love.

When his mother realized what had happened she made quite a scene. Eavey's mother was pleased. As he had mulled it over in his mind he had often wondered if his mother had been more reasonable if it might have not gone as far as it did. Her objections became barriers to overcome, it was a challenge when they realized she deliberately set about breaking up their love affair. He often thought that it was not

Eavey that she objected to, it would have been the same with any girl.

They convinced themselves that they could win her over once they were married. Twice she found out about their plans to run away and stopped them. That made it still more appealing and they went to the next town and she didn't know about it until it was too late. Halfway back in the living room she stood like an ominous mood, faceless in the gathering twilight, her hands on her large hips.

John, the bridegroom, lifted his wife and carried her into the dimness of his mother's house. In terror he could still hear her voice.

"What's wrong? Can't she walk?"

Down through the years he had gulped as he recalled that question? He suffered through it and could feel Eavey's icy fingers as they grasped his. She had stood small and frightened by his side. Ma had shattered the happiness of their wedding day.

John had not had a steady job when he married; he had just graduated from high school. They were miserable while they stayed with his parents. When he had a job they moved into two rooms, to themselves, but things seemed to have gotten off to a bad start. His new job did not pay well and with their lack of experience living was hard. There were no parties, no new dresses for Eavey, no dancing. He had loved to row on the river and that did not cost anything, but Eavey was deathly afraid of being on the water. He took her once and she was terrified, held on to the sides of the boat, her face white. He rowed back to the dock and ~~had~~ never even mentioned a ride on the river again.

The birth of their daughter had been hard on Eavey and she never seemed the same after it. She had sewed, made pretty little clothes,

planned so much for the coming child and after she was able to be up and about and there was no baby to wear the clothes, she had packed them away and begun to draw away from everyone. Gradually, she shut John and all of the people she knew out of her world. She became careless about her appearance and was never happy. John had tried to help her, but he failed. He had told Martha that he felt like he had broken a pretty toy. He felt that it was all his fault.

There had never been a divorce in either family and it was looked upon as something of a disgrace, a thing not to parade in front of respectable people. What else could they do?

John leaned forward, rested his forehead on his hands and cleared his throat. He sounded as if he was crying and she wanted to escape.

"Just a second, John." She turned and hurried into the house, carefully closed the screen door, looked in on Eavey and returned to the kitchen where she hesitated by the kitchen table and opened his lunch bucket, started to remove the crumbs and then decided to return to the porch.

He was looking out towards the pear tree, heavy with green fruit. They were always the last to ripen and he recalled how Ma had wrapped the solid green fruit in newspaper and packed them away in the attic so they could enjoy them after snow fell during the winter. Her sage-bushes were lavender and gray like old ladies dressed in mauve. The dill patch was slightly brown and the quince tree that his grandmother had planted stood twisted and gnarled, as if writhing in agony. Pa's hotbeds were overgrown with weeds, he'd have to pull those out

before they went to seed and spread another batch of wild things. He was proud of his garden and his ability to produce fine vegetables. The staked and trimmed tomatoes were burdened with fruit, all in the process of ripening, some pale green, some almost white, some pink, some ready-to-pick red. The shadow of the peak of the house cut the garden in half, like an arrow it pierced Sam Anderson's woodshed across the alley. Two turtle doves sat high above the shed on a thread of wire, their soft gray turned to warm beige by the setting sun.

"She's just like she was." She wished she were someplace else as she sat down. He sat quietly, not saying anything. He clasped and unclasped his hands. The ticking of the clock, the hum of the bees, and the unhappy lament of a robin seemed the only activity in the world.

Martha looked at him steadily and across her mind flashed the image of their son sitting exactly as her husband now sat, his hands dangling between his knees, his head bowed. Young John had come home from school early, was uncommonly still as he went through the house, had hardly spoken to her. He slammed the screen door and sat down with his back against the post. She had been busy in the kitchen and had paid little attention to him. When she chanced to look out she realized that something was wrong. He had been a junior in high school then and football was the most important thing in his life. When she glanced out later he seemed not to have moved. She opened the door and sat down beside him.

"What's wrong?" She peered sideways at him.

"Nothing . . . I'm all right." He didn't raise his head, seemed to resent her intrusion into his isolation.

"Nothing?" she queried. "You're too quiet. It's not like you, sitting out here by yourself."

"It's nothing, Mom."

"Well, then, I'll get back to fixing supper." She stirred as if to get up.

"Don't go, Mom." He chewed a fingernail. "I didn't make it. I'm not on the team."

So that was it, the world had not come to an end after all. She was relieved. To him it was all important. He hurt deep inside.

"I'm sorry," she said sincerely. "Maybe next year you'll make it."

"No, I'm just not good enough." He slapped at his knee. "I tried, I practiced, I worked hard at it, I'm just not good enough." His chest heaved and he snorted, "I'm not good enough." She reached over to put her hand over his, it was shaking and he jerked away.

"You know, everybody can't be on the team."

"Yes, but I tried hard."

"Of course you tried."

"And I didn't make it." He hit his knee with his fist.

"There's quite a bunch of seniors playing, didn't you say?"

"Yes, but that's not it."

"They won't be around next year, will they?"

He looked at her with disgust. "But, I wanted to play this year. I'm not good enough and I won't be next year either, you wait and see."

"You just might be."

"Oh, Mom!" He was on the verge of crying. "You just don't understand."

"You just don't understand." She started up, what she remembered him saying years ago penetrated deeply. "You just don't understand." That was it. When John had talked about Eavey he was trying to help her to understand. Instead of that she had turned away. In all the years she had set up a barrier that he could not cross. Oh, dear God, she thought. What has been wrong with me? She sat quietly trying to arrange her mixed up thoughts. It was her fault that he seemed strange and moody, she hadn't understood, she hadn't even tried. Because she had not understood, she had resented Eavey. Her thoughts ran wild. Was she jealous? Could she be jealous of a woman who was more dead than alive?

As one who faces into a blinding light she closed her eyes and turned as if to avoid the glare. She was shocked and bewildered. What should she do?

Clumsily she stood up, moved across the steps, and sat down at John's side. She was tense and unsure of herself as she laid her hand on his knee. He moved a bit closer to her and covered her hand with his. Gently, he patted it and felt her gradually relax. Slowly she raised her head and looked into his eyes searchingly. This was no stranger at her side, deep inside she knew him better than herself. He was kind and steady, not changeable and fitful as she was. He understood. She smiled and tightened her hold on his hand.

The sun disappeared, but there was a rosy glow in the sky. A restful quietness settled over the world, the man and woman on the steps were still. Gently he patted her hand and traced the veins with his finger.

"Maybe I had better check on Eavey," she said as she reluctantly arose. He watched her go and smiled.

She returned immediately and stopped at the door. Huskily she called his name, softly, so softly it was like a whisper.

"John, come quickly. I think it's over . . . all over." There was the sound of quiet relief in her voice.